

Look Who's Talking, Y'all: Dr. Phil, Vocal Accent and the Politics of Sounding White

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Abstract

From the first time Phillip C. McGraw, Ph.D.—better known as “Dr. Phil”—appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1998, dropping lines like, “My dad used to say, boy, don’t let yer alligator mouth overload yer hummin’ bird ass,” I was hooked. That accent! That no-nonsense, Southern sauce!

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From the first time Phillip C. McGraw, Ph.D.—better known as “Dr. Phil”—appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1998, dropping lines like, “My dad used to say, boy, don’t let yer alligator mouth overload yer hummin’ bird ass,” I was hooked. *That accent! That no-nonsense, Southern sauce!* From what fount of otherworldly knowledge did Phil drink? An insecure teen, gnawing and thrashing my way through high school’s convoluted social *milieu* (not to mention the murky waters of multiraciality), Dr. Phil’s frank, accented approach to life’s difficulties appeared as a god-send. It didn’t matter much what Dr. Phil was actually saying or whether his words when strung together formed logical thoughts, it was more the way he said things that affected me so. His deep, sing-songy lilt—preachy and avuncular—brought to mind a grandpappy smoking a pipe, whose wisdom was drawn from a hard day’s farmin’, not a god-forsaken textbook.

<https://youtu.be/5VjBbR07iU8>

With Oprah’s endorsement, the Cult of Phil grew fast and strong. Dr. Phil became a national figure—the corporate media’s version of a public intellectual and my own personal hero. His daytime talk show provided him with a regular platform from which to dispense more of that golden, “*Texan-dipped*” advice, as *The New York Times* put it. Selling over 2 million copies, his 2003 classic *Self Matters* began the onslaught of McGraw-family oeuvre, including several by his wife, Robin, and son, Jay—the face of Phil’s teen self-help brand. Not just a sage, Dr. Phil’s commitment to the McGraw family brand let us know he walked the walk. As evidenced by *Dr. Phil*’s opening credits, which feature behind-the-scenes glimpses of Mr. and Mrs. McGraw canoodling and his smiley next of kin, this family was for real. They loved and laughed together while cross-promoting each other’s book projects. Teenage Me wondered, *did white people get better than this?*



Screen capture from the opening credits to Dr Phil

Today, Dr. Phil’s star, and my admiration for him, have faded significantly, but one thing remains the same. Ever since I can remember, my older sister and I have communicated almost exclusively via over-the-top, celebrity impersonations and Dr. Phil became a particular mainstay; even now,

we religiously observe the maintenance of the Phil “voice.” Pre-Phil, I can recall my sister addressing me in a raspy, befuddled tone startlingly akin to the Keanu Reeves of yesteryear. Not soon after *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* became a permanent piece of our home VHS library, Reeves' trademark method of delivering lines amidst staggered, nonsensical pauses became an obsessive, sisterly tick. “Dude, shut the door when you pee” she might say, staring blankly at me and cocking her head abruptly to the side.



<https://youtu.be/q3fx6TugN7g>

The use of certain impersonations shifted with the ebb and flow of popular culture's somewhat predictable tide, depending on whose video was “TRL's” most requested or whose face most frequently graced the cover of *TV Guide*. I rehearsed George Herbert Walker Bush's famous “thousand points of light” campaign ad in front of the stained glass mirror adjacent to the family room television; after that, it was all about Phil Hartman's witty and endearing impersonation of Bill Clinton.



<https://youtu.be/Sx5X3Jd8DI4>

<https://screen.yahoo.com/clinton-mcdonalds-000000491.html>

It went on that way until Dr. Phil's shit blew up, and everything became solidified—as if, finally, my sister and I had found our one true voice. With age, I came to understand that Phil wasn't the prophetic genius I'd hoped he was and that our compulsive Phil-talk was an oddity, to say the least. I began to wonder *why*, even as adults, we continued to embarrass ourselves in public and take such pains to text each other in mock-“Texan” (thank goodness for smart phones' “add word” function).

It's actually quite common for people to adopt alternate voices or speech patterns. Take, for example, child-directed speech (“babytalk”) or pet-directed speech. Both are customized forms of vocal communication or “prosodic modification,” which, while differing dramatically from normative adult speech in their intonation and grammatical structure, are considered customary forms of address. In fact, [cross-linguistic studies](#) show that babytalk and pet-directed speech are common across other European languages, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. As such, parents and pet owners can rest well knowing that prosodic modification of the child and dog varieties are nearly universal human ticks. Unfortunately, research into child- and pet-directed speech didn't provide much insight into the unique phenomenon of “Phil-talk.” I had hoped to find other accounts in the literature, a history of similar episodes that might lift the shroud of tomfoolery, explain it away as all too common or evidence of psychological disorder x, y or z, something treatable with an esoteric name.



“Dr. Phil in Jacksonville” by Flickr user Craig ONeal, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

While at this point in my life Phil-talk is more or less an asinine charade, it continues to function as a key component of our familiar vernacular. Interestingly, when re-visiting the many impersonations that have come to define our adolescent years (the Keanu years, the Bush Sr. years, the Phil years), one thing becomes clear: all the voices we've adopted have been those of white, male, cultural standard-bearers (Ironically, Keanu Reeves also happens to be Hapa, though I

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never knew as much. His breakout role as “Ted” helped to popularize the “California dude” archetype). Additionally, I should note, that at no time did any female impersonations enter my repertoire. If you’re going to gain a voice, better make it a male one, no? The racial and gender dissonance that Phil-talk begets drives the urge to perform it.



The author's mother, with the author's sister and the author. Picture is property of the author.

From an early age, my mother would tell me tales of her sacrifice—how hard she worked when she came to this country and how difficult life could be in 1960s post-war South Korea—all in a voice with barely a shred of mispronunciation or foreign intonation. My father, a second-generation Swiss-Italian American, scrupulously corrected her syntactical missteps and any other vocal nuances that sounded un-American. It was important to my mother to succeed as an American, and most importantly, that her children succeed too. The pressure I felt to make her content was borderline unbearable. When I started doing the voices, it made my mother happy. She sometimes tried joining in, attempting to mimic key Phil phrases like, “You have gawt to get reee-al,” but to no avail. “You do it better than me,” she’d say, “...my accent.”

When I was young, people looked at me and asked, “what are you?” OR “where are you from?” “America,” I would say. “I’m an *American*.” These questions were provoked by the racial ambiguity of my mixed-race heritage—the hint of Asianness that marked me as something else. I could not change the shape of my eyes, the contour of my cheeks or the fact that my mother was Korean. But, I could try my hardest to act and *sound* like an American. Phil-talk became a way to obscure the Asianness, to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that I did, in fact, belong.

Rather than being merely a childhood performance of celebrity impersonations, I have come to think these various chapters were actually an attempt to perform sonic whiteness. Whether it was

Keanu's California dude cadence, George Bush Senior's waspy nasality, or Phil's prolonged Texan twang, I tried to perform in what Aja Martinez defines as "white voice" in her article "'The American Way': Resisting the Empire of Force and Color-Blind Racism" (593). She talks about Latino/a students using a "white voice" at school because they equate it with the voice of higher education, but I am really using it here as an explicit racial performance. As a half Korean, half Euro-American teen girl (now woman) who decides to very literally adopt the voice of a White, 50-something, Texan, TV psychologist, "white voice" was the name of the game, and people loved it—especially my Korean immigrant mother.

For Asian Americans in particular, a people whose national belonging has been culturally questioned and legally denied, accents substantiate and make audible what the eye sees as un-American. In Shilpa Dave's recently published *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film*, she explores accents as they relate to cultural citizenship, national belonging and "the allocation of power." Someone with an accent is "designated as an outsider to the dominant culture," writes Dave. In contradistinction to "foreign" sounding accents, Southern accents are a classic symbol of American cultural belonging, like apple pie for the ears.

Would Phil's wisdom sound as powerful or palatable without the accent? His appeal stems not only from his sometimes entertaining "Phil-isms" (e.g. "You can't hide the sunrise from a rooster"), but from all that he and his voice signify. A white, male doctor giving advice on TV is hardly noteworthy, but Phil's recognizably Southern accent separates him from the pack and softens the blow of his often severe advice.



Angela George [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)]%5D,
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Phil's accent (and his ringing endorsement from Oprah, [long a trendsetter for the white middle class](#)) have a way of diminishing racial and class barriers and cleverly marketing his advice as "good ol' common sense" that everyone can get behind. Though Southern African American vernacular is often represented, negatively, as "improper" or evidence of inferior educational attainment, a White doctor using many of the same linguistic nuances is considered "charming"

and “folksy.” One of the reasons people listen(ed) to Phil is because he’s a good, moustachioed Southern doctor that’s *gunna tell it to ya straight, ya’ll*. This kind of cultural capital is hard to manufacture. This, I figured wrongly, was what I stood to gain, not considering for a moment all that might be lost.

Constantly searching for ways to be seen, heard, and accepted within an American system of racial binarism that privileges whiteness, denigrates blackness, and locates yellowness somewhere in a No Man’s Land of racial categorization, sound’s flexibility has always seemed to me like a means to belonging. Furthermore, as a multiracial, Korean/White woman, even no man’s land can seem out of reach. As Michael Omi notes in the Introduction to [The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans](#), within the historical and political context of the United States, (the “one-drop rule,” eugenic fears of racial intermixing, anti-miscegenation laws, etc.) multiracial identities have consistently been “contained, disregarded, [and] denied.” Multiraciality disorients and confuses insofar as it can discredit entrenched signifiers which make race perceptible to the eye and ear.

[Previously on Sounding Out!](#), I discussed my identification with Nas and the rap world as both a move towards color and the formation of an authentic, multiracial self. A move in the opposite direction, experimenting with “white voice,” functions as another attempt to navigate America’s system of racial identification, albeit in a much more problematic vein. After years of Phil-talk and vocal impersonations of the white male variety, I am finally putting a stop to the charade. However earnest (or subconscious) an attempt to belong, the loss of time spent mimicking Phil represents an era of racial silencing that is somewhat difficult to stomach. Despite the amusement it has brought to friends and family, I am putting the voice to rest in service of getting real.

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Featured image: “Dr. Phil” by Flickr user House Committee on Education and the Workforce Democrats, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

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[Christie Zwahlen](#) is the Assistant Director at Binghamton University’s Center for Civic Engagement, where she has worked for four years to develop, expand and promote community engagement opportunities for students, faculty and staff. Previously, Christie worked for two years as an AmeriCorps VISTA, designing Service-Learning courses in conjunction with faculty at Thiel College and as the Coordinator of the Bridging the Digital Divide Program at Binghamton University. Christie earned her Master’s Degree in English and a Graduate Certificate in Asian & Asian American Studies from Binghamton University in 2009. She is currently enrolled in the English PhD program at Binghamton University.